

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

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The Centre of Excellence in Ancient Near Eastern Empires (ANEE) hosted the workshop “Construction of Identities and late Mesopotamian archives (after 539 BCE)” March 12–13, 2020, in Helsinki, organized by the editors of this special issue. However, the notion of the “archive” proved to be problematic for the various source corpora that were discussed during the workshop, as they ranged from cuneiform business archives to Greek historiography. Therefore, we found it more appropriate to find another label for this special issue: “Mesopotamian identities in the last centuries of cuneiform writing.”

The background of this workshop is connected with the research goals of ANEE. As a Centre, ANEE forms a combination of research project and research network whose current 38 researchers are all interested in the overarching research question of ANEE: How do changing imperial dynamics impact social group identities and lifeways over a millennium? As a research community, ANEE scholars contribute diverse methodological, linguistic and historical expertise. Much of the research work is carried out in small collaborative sub-projects in order to foster a fruitful dialogue between experts, such as Assyriologists, ancient historians, archaeologists, and social scientists. ANEE's research is carried out in three methodologically oriented research teams. The workshop was organized by Team 1, which utilizes recent advances in the digital humanities to examine multiple social group identities present in the first millennium empires and on their margins.

The main methodological *foci* of Team 1 are 1) using language technological methods to build contextual semantic models on individual lexemes that are of interest for the study of identities, 2) using social network analysis to examine social groups in the empires, and 3) supporting this Digital Assyriology work with more traditional philological, archival, and historical approaches. The aims of the workshop and this publication align with ANEE and Team 1 in two ways. First, it is relevant to discuss and outline the available written sources after 539 BCE, particularly by building an overview of digitized materials that might be relevant for digital methods. Second, it is important to discuss how we can research different facets of identity in these late sources.

We also found it important to cross some disciplinary boundaries in this special issue. Assyriologists working on the first millennium usually focus on the Neo-Assyrian or the Neo-Babylonian empires. These two empires combined cover roughly the first half of the first millennium BCE, but ANEE has devoted itself to the study of Mesopotamia in the whole first millennium. The end of cuneiform history or “Mesopotamian history” is a complex question. It is sometimes suggested as early as 539 BCE, when Babylon was conquered by the Persians.

A maximalist solution would be to let cuneiform history end in the first century CE, when the last cuneiform tablet was written. In any case, some of the Neo-Babylonian archives continue, more or less uninterrupted, after the fall of Babylon in 539 BCE until the much-discussed end of archives in 484 BCE.

After this date, the imperial administration seems to prefer other scripts and media than the traditional cuneiform clay tablets: first Aramaic written on papyrus or parchment and then Greek, also written on easily perishable organic material. At the same time, in recent decades there is a growing awareness among ancient historians that a history of the Persian Empire cannot be written by consulting Greek sources alone. Therefore, it is beneficial for research that experts from different fields collaborate in order to better understand the changing and complex history of the first millennium BCE Near East. This is particularly important when studying social groups and identities, as the use of different languages and scripts is a particularly important factor in these studies.

For the workshop and for this special issue, we have focused on the existing material and include different views on Mesopotamia. To use Martti Nissinen's metaphor, the sources and case studies discussed in this special issue provide us with keyholes through which we can gaze into Mesopotamian identities. The first article of the special issue is a broad overview article: "Sources at the end of the cuneiform era" by Tero Alstola, Paola Corò, Rocío Da Riva, Sebastian Fink, Michael Jursa, Ingo Kottsieper, Martin Lang, M. Willis Monroe, Laurie Pearce, Reinhard Pirngruber, Kai Ruffing, and Saana Svärd. The article discusses several groups of sources that are of special interest regarding the question of Mesopotamian identities after 539 BCE. In this late period, several languages and scripts were in use in Mesopotamia; therefore, groups of Akkadian, Aramaic, Greek, and Sumerian texts are discussed. The scripts used are Aramaic letters, cuneiform, and the Greek alphabet. A scholar who is interested in late Mesopotamian identities needs to take all these documents into account in order to get an impression of the diversity of identities through the diversity of this textual material. This article aims at giving a brief overview of available textual material and where to find it. The authors discuss Aramaic inscriptions, legal and administrative cuneiform texts, the astronomical diaries, the Seleucid Uruk scholarly texts, the late Babylonian priestly literature, Emesal cult-songs from the Hellenistic period, the Graeco-Babyloniaca (clay tablets containing cuneiform and Greek), and finally Greek inscriptions from Mesopotamia.

The second article of the volume, "Scribal Identities, Renaissances, and Dead Languages: From Barber Sumerian to Kitchen Latin" by Delila Jordan and Sebastian Fink is an investigation of the role of the knowledge of dead languages, namely Latin and Sumerian, for scribal or scholarly identities. While at first glance there is no obvious reason why a "dead language" should be part of the curriculum of people who were about to become the foremost administrators of their time, knowledge of one or more dead languages seems to be a pillar of scholarly self-consciousness in many periods. The three groups studied in this article are Mesopotamian scribes in general, especially those of the Old Babylonian schools; the *galas/kalûs*, professional lamentation singers that became scribes over the course of time; and Renaissance scholars, for whom a perfect grasp of Latin was of utmost importance.

The third article, "Ezekiel, Ethnicity, and Identity" by Martti Nissinen discusses the book of Ezekiel in the Hebrew Bible from the perspective of identity and ethnicity. Self-defined minority groups in Mesopotamia have rarely left behind written evidence about themselves and their identity strategies. A notable exception to this rule is the book of Ezekiel, which docu-

ments an intense and enduring attempt at reconstructing the identity of a dislocated group of people. The book of Ezekiel was produced by a group that constructed a diaspora identity from the early sixth century BCE onwards in an environment where the adaptation of a wide array of Mesopotamian linguistic, iconographic, literary, and theological motifs was possible. The book of Ezekiel can be read as an example of the survival strategy of a group that distinguishes itself from others by way of self-reidentification. The book does not reflect a stable and universally shared identity of the Judeans. On the contrary, it creates and constructs an inner-Judean antagonism between Ezekiel's in-group and the delegitimized out-group. The book of Ezekiel, therefore, does not say much about the integration of the Judean minority into Babylonian society but all the more about conflicts among the Judeans themselves.

In the fourth article, "Constructing Identities: Greek names as a marker of Hellenizing identity" Paola Corò and Laurie E. Pearce discuss the way Hellenizing identities were constructed in Mesopotamia when Babylonia came under foreign rule. In the transition to the Hellenistic period, it is assumed that Greek practices became more prevalent, although documentary evidence of them remains limited. Cuneiform legal texts documented a narrower range of transactions. In Uruk, these were primarily real-estate transactions and prebend sales, which continued to be framed in traditional Babylonian formulaic language. However, in these texts some actors display personal attributes and/or form networks suggesting they are promoting Hellenizing identities. The attributes include the adoption of Greek names, the use of polyonymous Akkadian-Greek names, and of Hellenistic motifs in the iconography of their seals. The evidence suggests that active construction of a Hellenizing identity is most apparent among members of the *ēpiš dulli ša řidi*, who belonged to the lowest stratum of the groups. Instead, the social networks of members of the Dumqi-Anu/Arad-Rēš family often attest to individuals who bridge between communities grounded in Babylonian culture and those who adopt features of Hellenizing identities.

The fifth article "Greek Inscriptions in Mesopotamia (and Babylonia)" by Kai Ruffing provides a short overview of the few Greek inscriptions from Mesopotamia which date to the period between the third century BCE and the first century CE. Ruffing argues that since the concept of "identity" has certain shortcomings for a historical analysis of an ancient society, it might be useful to apply the concepts of "commonality," "connectedness," and "groupness" for a deeper insight. Greek documents between the third century BCE and the first century CE are not plentiful, so Ruffing applies these concepts for some brief remarks on the graffiti of the "Nebuchelos-Archive" from Dura-Europos (third century CE). The article demonstrates how, in a situation of cultural contact which produced hybrid and ambiguous forms of cultural practices, individuals used different cultural markers and practices of the different societies to demonstrate and publicly display their "commonality" and "connectedness."

The sixth article of the special issue, "Changing Identities at the Turn of the Common Era: The Case of Semiramis" by Kerstin Droß-Krüpe explores the portrayal of the Babylonian queen Semiramis in Greek and Roman sources, demonstrating how ancient Near Eastern identities were constructed from the external perspective of Mediterranean cultures. Herodotus first mentioned Semiramis in the fifth century BCE, associating her with Babylon's architectural wonders. Ctesias described her as an outstanding but in many respects flawed military leader. Diodorus Siculus, who lived and wrote in the final stage of the Roman Republic, reshaped Ctesias' narrative and portrayed Semiramis more positively, emphasizing her beauty, virtues, courage, and intelligence. During the Roman Empire, Semiramis remained a remarkable figure

who accomplished great deeds, but later authors introduced negative aspects to her story. The Augustan Age portrayed her negatively, with new elements added, such as sodomy and murder, and used her as a stand-in for Cleopatra. Both queens were denigrated as female rulers and foreigners, emphasizing cultural differences between Mesopotamian and Roman identities. The portrayal of Semiramis served to categorize and stereotype Mesopotamian culture rather than to understand it. Ultimately, the article shows how Semiramis reflects different perceptions of Babylonia/Assyria and how her portrayal shifted over time in ancient literature, serving as part of Augustan propaganda to pass judgment on Cleopatra and emphasize cultural differences.

The seventh and final article of the volume, "Construction of Identities and Late Mesopotamian Archives as Found in the Fragments of the 'Graeco-Babyloniaca'" by Martin Lang focuses on the social reality behind the so-called Graeco-Babyloniaca. The Graeco-Babyloniaca consist of less than two dozen fragments of clay tablets, mainly inscribed with cuneiform signs on the obverse and with alphabetic Greek signs on the reverse. As possibly one of the last signs of life of the time-honored cuneiform script, they hint at the long tradition of Babylonian scholarship and learning on the one hand and at its disappearance via script-obsolence on the other. Although there are only a few tablets, the article suggests we can see traces of the social group behind the textual remains of the Graeco-Babylonian tablets and tablet fragments.

Finally, some thanks are very much in order. The original workshop took place just before the full onslaught of Covid-19. We offer heartfelt thanks to all the contributors that participated in Helsinki and online. Furthermore, many thanks to all the contributors to this special issue, both for their contributions (during the pandemic!) and their patience at the duration of the editing work. Your collaboration has made it a pleasant task to edit this issue.

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